DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 198 501 CS 005 903

AUTHOR Ratliff, Gerald Lee
TITLE Reader's Theatre: The "Theatrical" Approach to Teaching Literature.
PUB DATE [80]
NOTE 18p.

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Adults: *Class Activities: Creative Dramatics: Higher Education: *Literature Appreciation; *Oral Interpretation: *Readers Theater; Secondary Education: Theater Arts

ABSTRACT

This document presents a rationale for using reader's theatre in the classroom. It briefly discusses some of the conventions that distinguish reader's theatre from traditional theatrical productions, including direction of voice and action to the audience, and the use of scripts. The major portion of the paper offers seven exercises on the following aspects of reader's theatre: (1) vocal variety, volume, and projection: (2) focusing action and speech offstage: (3) pantomime: (4) dramatic animation; (5) facial expressions: (6) vocal variables: and (7) observation and role models. (HTH)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

ED198501

U S DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH,
EDUCATION & WELFARE
NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF
EDUCATION

THIS DOCUMENT HAS BEEN REPRODUCED EXACTLY AS RECEIVED FROM THE PERSON OR ORGANIZATION ORIGINATING IT. POINTS OF VIEW OR OPINIONS STATED DO NOT NECESSARILY REPRESENT OFFICIAL NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION POSITION OR POLICY

READER'S THEATRE: THE 'THEATRICAL' APPROACH TO TEACHING LITERATURE

Gerald Lee Ratliff

Montclair State College

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

Gerald Lee Ratliff

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

CS005903

The first, faint strains of a melodious lute float sweetly and quietly into a dimly-lit classroom. There is a hush of excitement and anticipation in the air as the music slowly fades. Four students enter silently from the corridors and approach the front of the classroom. One student, drssed in black and carrying a glistening sword, kneels in the center of the playing area and begins to weep. The other three students move to stools arranged in a semi-circle surrounding the playing area and sit.

Slowly, the student who is kneeling looks upward and then into the audience. There is obvious pain and suffering etched on the sad face, and the sword trembles in one hand. The student speaks from Hamlet:

> O, that this too too sullied flesh
> would melt,
> Thaw, and resolve itself into a dew!

In this simple beginning Reader's Theatre has begun to "dramatize" literature in the classroom, and to stimulate the imagination and the intellect of a host of young, eager and receptive adults. The classroom is alive with animation and enthusiasm. The literature is now relevant and meaningful. The lesson is learned and remembered. Reader's Theatre is innovative and creative. The instructor is pleased. All of this and more because the classroom has become an exciting environment in which students may explore and experiment with innovative ways to perform and to stage literature.

THEORETICAL PRELUDE

The primary theoretical principle of Reader's Theatre in the classroom is that it "dramatizes" literature to provide both a visual and an oral stimulus for the student unaccustomed to using imagination to experience literary works in performance. This suggestive "theatrical mind" approach to the teaching and subsequent performing of literature is an exciting discipline, relying as it does upon the creative viewpoint that to "see"literature is as relevant and valuable to a student's educational development as to "read" literature.

The primary performance principle of Reader's Theatre in the classroom is to "give life and meaning" to the literary experience described by the author; and to also stimulate listeners to "share" in the intellectual participation and emotional involvement that makes communication of literature meaningful.

BASIC APPROACH

There are many ways to approach the performance of Reader's Theatre in the classroom. The basic techniques which may be used will depend upon the instructor, the students, the type of literature being used, the facilities available, time allotted and the intended use of the performance. Reader's Theatre may be used to enhance critical study of literature and language; it may be used to explore appreciation and meaning of literature; it may be used to bring vitality and relevance to literature; it may be used to promote reading, writing and listening skills; and it may be used as a means by which students may publicly display

their creative performance talents to an audience of peers or parents.

SELECTED CONVENTIONS

Although Reader's Theatre is a part of the traditional theatre movement which seeks to "stage" the actions, the attitudes and the emotions of literature as they are sketched by the author, there are selected conventions which distinguish Reader's Theatre from typical theatrical productions and make it educationally valuable for classroom exploration.

In Reader's Theatre, the performer's vocal responses and physical actions are directed "forward" to assist the audience in visualizing what is being described in the literature. The setting, the mood and the other characters detailed in the literature may also be projected into the audience to promote listener identification and association. In addition, performers in Reader's Theatre may play a variety of roles in the literature and are more likely to develop creative performance skills because of the various interpretations needed to suggest more than "one" character.

Performers may either hold their scripts or place them on reading stands. The choice depends upon the instructor's and students' discretion. Performers may stand in a line facing the audience or they may sit on stools or chairs; or there may be combinations of sitting and standing. The instructor and the students are encouraged to choose the performance means by which the author's intentions may best be expressed. Performers also usually remain on stage throughout the performance and

may have individual lines of narration or dialogue, or they may share lines with other performers.

Performers may wear suggestive costumes and make-up, or they may wear their own clothing. Creative expression and originality of both the instructor and the students is the key ingredient for determining what choices are available and acceptable for best expressing the meaning and feeling evoked by the literature; and in Reader's Theatre the performers should choose whatever means is available to them for subtly suggesting the author's intent.

Classroom staging in Reader's Theatre may include the traditional elevated stage framed by a proscenium arch at one end of an auditorium, or the staging may be as flexible and creative as facilities permit. For example, the classroom may be arranged "in-the-round," "semi-circle," or "three-quarter round." Classroom staging may even include additional theatrical accessories like ramps, platforms, curtains, drapes or a "backdrop" depicting a painted setting. There is also the opportunity to use lighting, sound, music, special effects and projections to suggest the locale depicted in the literature.

PERFORMANCE BLUEPRINT

Although the instructor cannot expect to discover a simple formula for incorporating the basic principles of Reader's Theatre into every classroom assignment, the selected exercises which follow are included to provide the foundation needed to promote further exploration and experi-

mentation. The instructor should approach the selected exercises in a manner that is both comfortable and appropriate for an individual style of teaching; and should take the creative liberty of adjusting or extending the selected exercises to meet the special needs of individual students.

Each of the selected exercises is framed as a working blueprint to stimulate student awareness of the principles of Reader's Theatre staging; to provide the basic ingredients of vocal and physical performance of literature; to promote development of believable characterization; and to stimulate student appreciation of the mechanics involved in bringing a scripted program of selected literature "alive" in classroom performance.

The instructor is encouraged to supplement the selected exercises with active class participation and discussion, and to promote a creative atmosphere of relaxed inquiry so that the principles of Reader's Theatre may be <u>seen</u> as well as <u>heard</u>.

SELECTED EXERCISES

Exercise 1: TO YELL, OR NOT TO YELL!

Goals: To present the basic principles of "voicing" a character by developing an awareness of vocal variety, volume and projection.

Approach: Working with a poem of four to six lines, divide the students into groups of five. Have each student group decide its order of performing the poem and begin the exercise with each group entering the playing area.

The first student of the group voices the poem in the lowest possible whisper that may still be heard and understood by the audience listeners; the second student voices the poem in a slightly louder volume; the third student voices the poem in a somewhat louder volume; until, finally, student five yells the poem.

Following a discussion of what was appropriate volume for the selected literature, group two enters the playing area. The first student of the group voices the poem with the lowest possible pitch that may still be heard and understood by the audience listeners; the second student voices the poem in a slightly higher pitch; the third student voices the poem in a somewhat higher pitch; until, finally, student five voices the poem with the highest possible pitch.

Following a discussion of what was appropriate pitch for the selected literature, group three enters the playing area. Each student of the group voices the poem in the appropriate volume and pitch necessary to project, or to "direct," the literature to all areas of the audience. This may be done on an individual basis, with the first student projecting to the area right of the playing area, the second student projecting to the area left of the playing area and

concluding with student five projecting to the entire audience area; or it may be done in group unison, with the students exercising the ensemble approach to voice the volume, the pitch and the projection necessary for both good vocal variety and for gaining listaner attention.

Exercise 2: MIRROR, MIRROR ON THE WALL

Goals: To develop an awareness of offstage focus and to direct the student performer in the placement of characters in the audience.

Approach: Choose a selection of literature that contains both dialogue and action that is to be performed using offstage focus. For each character represented in the literature place a corresponnding mirror on the wall at the back of the classroom. The mirror should be large enough to reveal the individual performer from head to foot. If full-length mirrors are not available, or if a room with walll-to-wall mirrors cannot be located, the exercise may still be directed toward the facial expressions of individual characters as they are seen in the use of offstage focus.

The performers within the playing area establish a relationship with the "characters" in the audience by informally chatting with them and by noticing their physical characteristics. There should be a review of the techniques of offstage focus so that the performers recall the specific line of intersection to which they are to direct dialogue or action when addressing and reacting to a character placed offstage.

Begin with an informal recitation of the literature so that the performers begin to feel comfortable with the convention of addressing

someone standing next to them as though they were in the audience. Remind the performers to observe the facial and physical reactions of the characters they address, and that they are to respond to the "action" described in the literature within a very confined space.

Re-read the literature again and concentrate on suggesting the vocal and physical characteristics which will distinguish one character from another. Encourage the performers to respond to the action being described, and to pay special attention to the adjectives and the verbs that might help to bring the literature "alive" in performance.

When confident that the performers are precise in their use of offstage focus, and that each performer has captured a viable suggestion of the character in terms of what is "said" and "done" in the literature, remove the mirrors and perform the selection again. Follow this performance with an inquiring class discussion to point out the differences in performance with the mirrors and without; and note the believibility of each performer's handling of "action" using offstage focus in comparison to the use of mirrors.

Exercise 3: BOOK ENDS

Goals: To stimulate the student performer to visualize words and to introduce the element of pantomime into the dramatization of action suggested in literature.

Approach: Begin the exercise by dividing the class into groups of three. Present each group with a slogan, a quotation or a popular public service message. Examples might include the slogan for the airline commercial, "Up, up and away!"; the pithy suggestion of Shakespeare

to "eat no onions nor garlic, for we are to utter sweet breath"; or the public service warning, "Turn off the juice when not in use." Instruct the groups to devise a creative pantomime which makes clear the action described in the material given them.

Now instruct the groups to perform the pantomime without any verbal identification or suggestion. Follow each group performance with an inquiring discussion to determine if the listeners were able to visualize the words as they were suggested by the pantomime. Pay particular attention to an evaluation of the pantomime in terms of its energy, its degree of suggestion, its detailed "spelling out" of the action, and its overall effectiveness in communicating the idea contained within the slogan, the quotation or the public service message.

Now instruct each group to surround their pantomime with the spoken text of the slogan, the quotation or the public service message. Reinforce the Reader's Theatre principle that in performance of literature the words of the author are surrounded by the action suggested.

This "book end" approach to the exercise places one student performer in the center of the group presenting the pantomime to the accompaniment of the words spoken by the other two student performers, who are located left and right of the playing area.

Once the students associate the role of pantomimed action with the suggestion of the author's words, the instructor may wish to expand the exercise to include group readings of narrative prose or drama.

Exercise 4: THE BODY BEAUTIFUL!

Goals: To encourage students to physicalize the literature in terms of

suggestive body reactions and to promote animation and the abandon necessary to give character to a dramatization of the literature.

Approach: Divide the class into groups of four, labeling each group with a humorous name that corresponds to a part of the body; as, for example, the CRAZY LEGS, the PIN HEADS, the LAZY FEET, or the SLEEPY ARMS.

Call the members of each group to the front of the class individually. Point out the need to use all parts of the body to "react" to the literature and to stimulate the listener's understanding of the action described. Then begin to call out specific actions and bodily activities that suggest "movement," and ask the students to respond to the suggestion using their appropriate group label. For example, the CRAZY LEGS might be asked to respond to action words involving "running," "jumping," or "skipping"; and the SLEEP ARMS might be asked to respond to bodily activities involving "yawning," "stretching," or "scratching."

In the discussion which follows each group's efforts to overtly physicalize the actions or bodily activities called for, the instructor should encourage the students to "recall" the degrees of tension, relaxation or movement of the individual parts of the body involved in the previous responses; and should also take special care to point out that physicalization must be as authentic and believable as the "real" motions involved in such actions or activities. Conclude the exercise by presenting the class with a prose selection, like Joseph Conrad's THE LAGOON or Dr. Zeuss's THE GRINCH WHO STOLE CHRISTMAS. Have the students first chart the possibilities to physicalize suggested actions

or bodily activities and then to present the selections as part of a BODY BEAUTIFUL! DAY with an invited audience.

Exercise 5:- PUT ON YOUR FACE!

Goals: To acquaint the student with the need to communicate mood or attitude with facial expressions and to suggest the need for facial expressions to help clearly define character.

Approach: The instructor begins the exercise by writing on slips of paper a variety of "moods" or "attitudes" that might be suggested by facial expressions. For example, the variety needed to highlight the role of facial expression in communicating the literature might include "angry," "fearful," "happy," "amused," "inquisitive," "sad," "disappointed," "expectant," "bored" or "cunning."

There should be enough slips of paper for the number of students in the class. The slips of paper are placed in a SMILE/FROWN BOX (or a hat) and the students are asked to draw individually when it is their turn to perform. The first student moves to the playing area and uses the face only to suggest the selected mood or attitude. When the observers have guessed the suggested mood or attitude, a second student selects a slip of paper and the process is repeated until all the students have had an opportunity to communicate a mood or an attitude using only the face.

Now the students are given a selection of literature that contains a variety of emotions or moods and attitudes and asked to combine appropriate facial expressions and vocal qualities to dramatize the literature. The exercise may also be expanded to include physical

response to the selected mood or attitude, so that what emerges in a final performance of the literature distributed to the students is a harmony of the voice and the body to express a given "feeling" or "thought."

Exercise 6: I BEG YOUR PARDON, WHAT DID YOU SAY?

Goals: To promote an awareness of the role that "vocal variables" might play in suggesting character, to encourage active "word play" in the interpretation of literature, and to reinforce the need for subtlety in character development.

Approach: Begin the exercise by passing out the following "NO" selection to the students. Instruct them to voice the word to achieve the desired meaning indicated using the vocal variables of pitch, rate and volume; and to also relate the list to (1) specific "character type" who comes to mind. The list is performed individually in front of the class with the chosen character type speaking in a variety of suggestive meanings using the vocal variables.

NO?	(What was that you said?)
NO?	(You can't mean that, can you?)
NO?	(How dare you!)
NO.	(We'll see about that!)
NO.	(Well, if that's the way you feel.)
NO.	(I'm sorry, I forgot to do that.)
NO?	(Does this mean it's over for us?)
NO?	(You weren't with someone else?)

No!	(I absolutely refuse!)
NO.	(But thank you anyway.)
NO!	(I'm not interested in doing it.)
No.	(You must be kidding.)
NO!	(I told you before, no.)
NO?	(I could be persuaded.)
NO?	(Are you positive?)

Now continue the exercise by "matching" characters in groups of two. Have the students repeat the list in the following manner: The first student's character voices the first meaning of the word and the second student's character responds with the meaning of the second word. The alternation of character responses to the desired meaning of the word continues until the list is concluded.

The exercise may be extended, however, if the instructor will present the class with a variety of short cuttings from the drama that includes two characters involved in a conversation that suggests a "subtext," or implied interaction existing between or beneath the surface of the spoken language, to their relationship. Examples useful for this extension of the exercise might include the "balcony scene" in William Shakespeare's ROMEO AND JULIET, the "tea scene" in Oscar Wilde's THE IMPORTANCE OF Being Earnest, the "photograph scene" in Milan Stitt's THE RUNNER STUMBLES, the "pledge of allegiance scene" in Aristophanes's LYSISTRATA or the "seduction scene" in Eugene O'Neill's DESIRE UNDER THE ELMS.

In this extended exercise the student performers should again use pitch, rate and volume to suggest the implied meaning, and should concentrate on the subtlety involved in developing meaningful "word play."

The instructor might also wish to combine this part of the exercise with MIRROR, MIRROR ON THE WALL (#2) to review or reinforce the basic principles of offstage focus.

Exercise 7: BRING A FRIEND TO CLASS!

Goals: To promote student understanding and appreciation of the role that observation plays in development of believable character, to suggest alternative sources of role models in developing three-dimensional character, and to provide an opportunity to engage in metaphorical movement.

Approach: The instructor should present the class with a selection of literature that provides an opportunity for many and varied characterizations and direct the students to select (1) character from the literature to perform. Representative examples for this exercise might include Charles Dickens's A CHRISTMAS CAROL, Leo Tolstoi's WAR AND PEACE, Geoffrey Chaucer's THE CANTERBURY TALES, Herman Melville's MOBY DICK, Franz Kafka's THE TRIAL or Pearl S. Buck's THE GOOD EARTH.

The instructor may adapt the script or choose to extend the exercise by placing the students into groups of five or six and having them spend several days adapting a representative scene for performance. Regardless of the approach elected, however, the students are then instructed to observe closely, and with a critical eye, those with whom they come in contact the next five days. The observations may include parents, teachers, friends, casual acquaintances or strangers.

Following this pre-arranged period of detailed observation, and supplemented with an analysis of the character as reflected in the

literature, the students are to select the mannerisms, the gestures, the movements, the vocal qualities and the distinguishing personal habits of those examined which best reflect the analysis of their chosen character.

It may also be of value to the observation and resulting performance if the student is able to discover in the analysis a "metaphor," or implied comparison between the character and something inventive, and to incorporate those complimentary features into the performance blueprint. For example, an analysis of the character Leah in Joyce Carol Oates's narrative novel BELLFLEUR might suggest the performance metaphor of "ostrich"; a detailed analysis of the character Tetley in Walter Van Tilburg Clark's historical saga THE OX-BOW INCIDENT might well suggest the performance metaphor of "knight errant"; and a perceptive analysis of the character Tull in William Faulkner's mystic AS I LAY DYING could result in the performance metaphor of "an uncurried horse awaiting death."

On the day set aside for the presentation of the selected literature, each student should BRING A FRIEND TO CLASS, and introduce the "friend" in the words and the actions of the character as detailed in the performance.

SUMMARY

With these basic exercises as a guide, the instructor and the student should both gain an awareness of the performance and staging methods which may be used creatively to "dramatize" literature so that it becomes "alive" in the imagination of the listener. What now remains is

the limitless imagination necessary to dramatize novels, poems, short stories, letters, newspaper articles, diaries, song lyrics, or any other dramatic material which provides an opportunity for visual and oral "re-enactment." Indeed, the challenging aspect of Reader's Theatre is going beyond the traditional drama playscript and to make <u>any</u> aspect of literature "dramatic" by giving it the characteristics associated with theatrical production and performance.